

French Lessons

For Anastasia Prokofyevna Kopylova



It's odd that we should always feel guilty towards our teachers, the same way we do towards our parents. It's not because of what goes on in school either, but because of what happens to us later on.

I went into the fifth grade in 1948. To put it more precisely, I travelled into it: we only had a primary school in our village, so in order to continue my education I was forced to move the fifty kilometres from home to the regional centre. My mother went over there a week in advance and arranged for me to live with a friend of hers. On the last day of August, Uncle Johnny, driver of the farm's only 30-hundredweight, unloaded me on Podkamennaya Street where I was going to live, helped me into the house with my belongings and bed-roll, clapped me encouragingly on the shoulder by way of goodbye and trundled off. So began, at the age of eleven, my independent life.

There was still no let-up in the famine that year and mother had three of us, with me as the eldest. In the spring, when things were especially bad, I swallowed – and forced my little sister to do likewise – some eyes from the seed potatoes along with grains of oats and rye. This was to lay down a crop so we wouldn't have to keep thinking about food all the time. All summer we assiduously sprinkled our seeds with pure Angara water, but no harvest came, or there was so little of it that we couldn't feel it. Incidentally, I don't think it was a totally useless notion; it will come in one of these days, it was just that we went wrong somewhere through lack of experience.

It would be hard to say why mother finally decided to let me

go to the region (as we called the regional centre). We were a one-parent family and led a hopeless existence, so she reasoned, obviously, that it could get no worse – how could it? I was good at lessons, enjoyed school and was acknowledged a scholar in the village; I used to write letters for the old women and read the replies to them; I rummaged through every book in our unprepossessing library and related all kinds of stories out of them to the lads in the evening, with additional material of my own. It was in the matter of government bonds, however, that people invested a particular trust in me. In the course of the war people had accumulated a good many of these and the lists of winners arrived frequently, at which point the bonds were brought to me. I was reckoned to have a lucky eye. People really did win, too, small amounts for the most part, but in those days farm-workers were glad of every penny and here was a completely unexpected prize to be had at my hands. Their joy was inevitably transferred to me as well. I was singled out among the village lads, even given things to eat; once Uncle Ilya, for the most part a tight-fisted old skinflint, overjoyed at winning four hundred roubles, impulsively dug me up a pailful of potatoes – treasure indeed as spring was approaching.

It was all because I knew about bond numbers that they used to tell my mother: 'That lad of yours has got a head on him. You should ... you know, send him to be learned. Education never comes amiss.'

And mother, despite all her misfortunes, got me ready, although up till then nobody from our village had ever gone to school in the region. I was the first, and I certainly didn't understand properly what was in store for me, what experiences awaited a fledgling like me away from home.

I was good at my lessons here, too. What else could I do? That was why I had come here, I had no other reason, and I had not yet learned to adopt an off-hand attitude to obligations laid upon me. I would scarcely have dared to go to school if I

had left even one lesson unprepared, so I had grade 'A's in all my subjects except French.

The trouble in French was my pronunciation. I could easily remember words and phrases, translate swiftly and coped perfectly with difficult points of orthography but pronunciation gave away all my Angara upbringing with a vengeance; there, from the day they were born, nobody ever uttered a foreign word – if indeed their existence was suspected. I gabbled in French after the manner of our country tongue-twisters, swallowing half the sounds as not wanted, and blurting out the other half in short, barking salvos. Lidia Mikhailovna, our French teacher, used to frown helplessly and close her eyes whenever she listened to me. She had, of course, heard nothing like it before. Again and again she would demonstrate how to pronounce nasals and vowel combinations and ask me to repeat them, but I got confused, my tongue was petrified and wouldn't move. It was all wasted effort. The worst part was after I got home from school. While I was there, there were plenty of distractions and I had to be doing things all the time. The lads were always pestering me and whether I wanted to or not, I was constantly on the move with them, playing and, in the lessons, working. But as soon as I was by myself, depression overcame me – I was homesick for the old house and the country. I had never been separated from the family before, not for so much as a day, and was naturally unprepared for a life among strangers. How awful I felt, how bitterly miserable it all was! Worse than any illness could be. There was only one thing I wanted, yearned for – to go home, home. I lost a lot of weight; when mother came at the end of September, she was frightened. While she was there I put a bold face on it and refrained from complaining or crying, but as she was leaving, I broke down and raced after the car weeping my eyes out. Mother waved at me to stop and not disgrace myself and her. I didn't comprehend. Then she made up her mind and turned off the engine.

‘Pack your things,’ she demanded as I came up. ‘It’s all over, you’ve finished studying, let’s go home.’

I came to my senses and fled.

I lost weight, however, not only because I was homesick. Besides that I was always short of food. In autumn when Uncle Johnny was transporting wheat to the granary, which was located close to the Regional Centre, I received food quite often, about once a week. The trouble was, it wasn’t enough. There was nothing but bread and potatoes – and sometimes mother had put in a jar of cottage cheese – got in exchange for something; she didn’t keep a cow. When it came it seemed a lot, but it lasted two days and was gone. I very soon began to notice that a good half of my bread was disappearing somewhere in the most mysterious fashion. I checked and I was right: it was there, then it wasn’t. The same thing happened with the potatoes. Who was filching them – Aunty Nadya, a loud woman, who had a dog’s life on her own with three little lads, or one of her elder girls, or her youngest boy Teddy? I didn’t know and was afraid to think about it, let alone investigate. It was just exasperating that mother was denying my little brother and sister for my sake and it was going elsewhere. I forced myself, however, to come to terms even with that. It would do my mother no good to learn the truth.

The famine here was quite unlike that in the country. There, especially in the autumn, you could always get hold of something, tear off a bit of that, dig up the other. There were fish in the Angara and birds in the forest. Here, everything seemed empty to me; alien people, alien gardens, an alien earth. The tiny trickle of a stream was filtered through ten sets of drag-nets. One Sunday I sat with my fishing-rod all day and caught three small gudgeon the size of a teaspoon. Success of that sort does nothing for your disposition. I never went again – why waste time? In the evenings I lounged about by the café in the market, memorizing how much everything cost until my mouth watered and I went home empty-handed. On

Aunty Nadya's hob stood a hot kettle; I would glug down some plain water and, having warmed my stomach, went to bed. In the morning, to school again. So I dragged out the time till the happy hour when Uncle Johnny drew up to the gate in his truck and rapped on the door. Starving by now and aware that my grub wouldn't last long, I made no attempt to economize and gorged till my belly ached; then after a day or two tightened my belt again.

One day, still in September, Teddy asked me: 'Have you got nerve enough to play "chika"?''

'What's "chika"?' I enquired.

'A game. For money. If you've got any, let's go and play.'

'I haven't got any.'

'Nor have I. Let's just go and watch. You'll see – it's great.'

Teddy took me past the gardens along the edge of a raised hillock all overgrown with nettles, black now and tangled with pendulous clusters of poisonous seeds; we made our way across an old rubbish-dump, leaping from hillock to hillock, and saw the lads on a clear and level patch of ground down in the dip. We came up to them. The lads were on their guard. They were all about the same age as me except one – a well-built, sturdy boy with a long, ginger forelock, who stood out for strength and presence. I recalled that he was in the seventh grade.

'What did you bring him for as well?' he asked Teddy.

'He's one of us, Vadik, he's OK.'

Teddy began justifying himself. 'He lives with us.'

'Are you going to play?' Vadik asked me.

'No money.'

'Watch you don't snitch on us.'

'As if I would!' I said, offended.

They paid no more attention to me and I moved to one side and started to watch. Not everyone played; sometimes it was six, sometimes seven. The rest just stood gawking and offered

support, mostly to Vadik. He was the boss here, I realized that at once.

The game was simplicity itself. Each put ten kopecks in the kitty. The pile of coins was dropped, tails upwards, on to a space marked out with a greasy yellow line about two metres from the coins. From the other side, from a boulder embedded in the earth which served as a point of support for the front leg, a circular stone was tossed. You had to get it as near as possible to the line, but not beyond it – then you had the first chance to throw at the coins. You used the same round stone to throw and try to turn the coins over. If you turned one over, it was yours, carry on; if not, the turn passed to the next player. The main point, however, was to try to cover coins with the stone; if even one of them turned out to be head-up, the whole kitty passed into your pocket without argument and the game started over again.

Vadik was cheating. He would get to the boulder after everyone else, when the whole throwing pattern was clear and he could see where to throw in order to start the game. The money used to go to the early throwers, rarely to those at the rear. No doubt everyone realized he was cheating but no one dared to mention it to him. He did play skilfully as well. As he came up to the rock, he squatted slightly and screwed up his eyes as he directed the stone, threw, and rose smoothly, unhurriedly.

The stone would slide from his hand and land just where he had aimed it. With a swift movement of the head he flicked back his displaced kiss-curl, spat carelessly to one side to show that it was all over, and walked at a lazy, deliberately sedate pace across to the money. If the coins were in a heap he struck sharply, with a clink; single coins he touched glancingly with the stone, rolling it so that the coin was not spun up into the air but merely flipped over, just above the ground, on to its other side. Nobody else could do this. The lads threw more or less at random, and produced more coins; those who hadn't any more

joined the ranks of the spectators.

It seemed to me that if I had had some money, I could have played. We'd messed about with knucklebones in the village, and you need an accurate eye even for that. Apart from which, I enjoyed thinking up games to test my marksmanship. I'd collect a handful of stones, pick out a target which presented some difficulty and bombard it until I had got a perfect score – ten out of ten. I would lob stones up in the air, from behind my back, from below or hanging over the target. So I did have a proficiency of sorts. What I didn't have was money.

That was why mother sent me bread, there was no money at home. Where would you get it on a collective farm? All the same, she sent me five roubles enclosed in a letter once or twice – for milk. In new currency it was fifty kopecks, not riches of course but money all the same. You could buy five half-litre bottles of milk in the market at a rouble each. Milk was prescribed for me to counter anaemia – I would often get dizzy all of a sudden for no obvious reason.

When I received a fiver for the third time I didn't go for milk. I changed it into small coins and headed for the dump. The place had been chosen sensibly, that was certain: the clearing was surrounded by hillocks and could not be seen from any side. In the village where adults could see you, games like this were proscribed, there were threats of headmaster and police. Here nobody disturbed us. It wasn't far either, you could run it in ten minutes.

The first time I went down ninety kopecks, the second, sixty. Of course I was sorry to see it go, but I felt I was getting used to the game; my hand was gradually becoming used to the throwing-stone, learning to impart just enough strength so that the stone flew straight; my eyes also learned to predict where it would fall and how much it would roll forward. In the evenings after everyone had gone I used to come back, retrieve the thrower from where Vadik had stowed it beneath a rock, dig out my loose change and throw until it got dark. It got so

that I could guide three or four out of ten throws on to the coins.

At last came the day when I actually won.

Autumn was dry and warm. Even in October it got warm enough to go about in shirt sleeves. Rain came rarely and seemed a chance affair, carried at random to us from some area of bad weather by some feeble, passing wind. The sky was almost summer-blue, but had got narrower, so to speak, and the sun set early. The air streamed over the hills in these pure hours, bearing the bitter heady scent of dry wormwood. Distant voices carried clear, and loud, migrating birds called as they flew. The grass on our clearing, yellowish and exhausted, stayed springy and soft as boys released from the game, the losers that is, rolled about on it.

Now I ran there every day after school. The complement of boys changed; new ones appeared, only Vadik never missed a single game. The game didn't start until he arrived. Behind Vadik, like a shadow, trailed a squat youth with a large close-shaven head; his nickname was Birdy. I had not encountered Birdy in school till then but, running ahead of myself, I will say that in the third term he landed on our class like snow falling off a roof. It turned out he was repeating his fifth year and under some sort of pretext had wangled himself a holiday until January. Birdy used to win as a rule, though not as often as Vadik; a bit less, too, but he was never out of pocket. This was probably because he was in cahoots with Vadik who helped him on the sly.

Tishkin used to run to our patch sometimes; he was one of our class, a fidgety boy with rapidly blinking eyes who loved to raise his hand in class. Whether he knew the answer or not, up it went. If the teacher asked him – silence.

'Why on earth did you put your hand up?' they used to ask him.

He would flicker his little eyes: 'I remembered and while I was standing up I forgot.'

I wasn't friends with him. I was too timid, quiet, tight-lipped in the country manner but, above all, too dreadfully homesick to have any desire to take up with any of the boys. They were not drawn to me either. I remained solitary, unable to understand or separate my loneliness from my general wretched situation: alone because I was here and not at home in the country; there I had comrades in plenty.

It appeared that Tishkin did not notice me at the clearing. After losing quickly he would disappear and only return after an interval.

Meanwhile I went on winning. I started winning on a regular basis, every day. I had a system of my own: there was no need to win the right to first throw; when there were a lot of players that was no simple matter: the nearer you edged to the line, the greater the chance of dropping across it and going last. The thing was to cover the coins with your throw and that I used to do. Of course it was a risk, but with my skill it was a justified one. I might lose three, four times in a row, but if I won the kitty on the fifth, I got back my losses three times over. Then I lost a few times, then won again. I didn't often have to strike the coins with the thrower, but even here I employed my system. If Vadik rolled the stone towards him as the cast I, contrariwise, cut it away from me—that was unusual, but it held the coin, preventing it from spinning and turned it over as it broke back.

Now I had money. I did not allow myself to be carried away with the play and hang about the clearing till evening. I only needed a rouble, just a rouble a day. When I'd got it, I ran off to buy a bottle of milk in the market (the old wives grumbled at seeing my worn and battered coins but poured the milk out just the same) then had my dinner and sat down to my homework. I still didn't eat my fill, but the idea that I had milk to drink gave me added strength and subdued my hunger. I began to think that my giddy fits were becoming a good deal less frequent.

At first Vadik took my successes placidly enough. He

himself was never a loser and very little found its way from his pocket to mine. He even praised me a little on occasion: that's how it's done, he would say, take a lesson from that, wasters. Soon, however, Vadik noticed me quitting the game too quickly and stopped me once:

'What's this then – grab the kitty and split? Bright spark, aren't you! Come on, play.'

'I've got my homework, Vadik,' I began to plead.

'People with homework don't come here.'

Then Birdy joined in the refrain: 'Who told you to play for money that way? For your information, that's how people get roughed up a little bit. Got it?'

Vadik didn't let me throw before him any more and made me go last. His throwing was good and I had frequent need to feel in my pocket for another coin before I even got to throw myself. Nevertheless, I threw better and if I did get the chance of a cast, the stone would fly as if magnetized, straight on to the coins. I amazed even myself with my accuracy; I should have realized the need for restraint and tried to keep a low profile; instead I played fair and mercilessly went on clobbering the kitty. How was I to know that no one who excels in his craft is ever forgiven? No mercy should be expected, no indulgence looked for; as far as the others are concerned he is an upstart and the one who hates him most of all is the one closest behind. I was to learn my lesson that autumn.

I had just struck it rich again and was on my way to pick up the coins, when I noticed that Vadik had placed his foot on one of them, off to one side. All the rest lay tailside up. In cases like this, the usual cry was 'kitty', to collect the money into one heap – if there was no head-side showing – for the next blow. I, however, still hoping for success as usual, made no sound.

'No kitty,' announced Vadik.

I went up to him and attempted to move his foot off the coin, but he pushed me away, swiftly picked it up and showed me the tail.

I managed to see that it had been a head – he wouldn't have tried to cover it otherwise.

'You turned it over,' I said. 'It was a head, I saw.'

He thrust his fist under my nose. 'Seen that before? Have a good sniff.'

I had to back down. To persist would have been pointless; if it had come to a fight, nobody would have supported me, not even Tishkin who was dancing attendance.

Vadik's narrowed, evil eyes looked at me point-blank. I stopped and threw at the nearest coin lightly, turned it over and moved another. 'Still come out right whatever the twister does,' I decided. 'I'll take the lot now all the same.'

I took aim again, but did not have time to throw: someone suddenly kned me from behind and I stumbled to the ground, head down. There was laughter all round.

Behind me, smiling expectantly, stood Birdy. I was taken aback: 'W-Why do that?!'

'Who said it was me?' he objected. 'Dreaming are you?'

'Give that here!' Vadik thrust out his hand for the throwing stone, but I did not give it up. Exasperation had put my fear to rout, I was afraid of nothing on earth now. Why? Why were they treating me like this? What had I done to them?

'Give it here!' demanded Vadik.

'You turned that coin over!' I shouted at him. 'I saw you turn it over. I saw it.'

'Well now, say that again,' he requested, advancing on me.

'You turned it,' I said, quietly now, knowing what would follow.

The first to hit me, again from behind, was Birdy. I flew at Vadik, who at once butted me in the face, quickly and neatly and I fell to the ground with blood spurting from my nose. As soon as I got up, Birdy threw himself upon me. It was still possible to extricate myself and flee, but for some reason I never considered that.

I moved between Vadik and Birdy making almost no

defence, pressing my palm to my nose, from which blood was gushing; in my despair, I added to their fury by shouting again and again: 'Turned! Turned! Turned!'

They took turns to hit me, first one, then the other. Some third party, small and spiteful, kept kicking my legs; afterwards they were almost completely covered in bruises. I was only concerned to stay on my feet, just keep on my feet, to do otherwise seemed disgraceful even at such a moment. But in the end they beat me to the ground and quit.

'Get out while you're still alive!' ordered Vadik. 'Quick!'

I got to my feet, sobbing and swallowing blood from my nose; now completely numb, I dragged myself up the hill.

'If you snitch to anybody, you're dead!' promised Vadik as I left.

I made no reply. Everything inside me had hardened and coalesced into an overwhelming sense of injury. I had no strength left to utter a single word. It was only as I crested the hillock that I let go and yelled as loudly as I could; probably the whole settlement heard: 'T-u-urned.'

Birdy made as if to follow after me but at once turned back; Vadik no doubt reasoned that I'd had enough and stopped him. I stood for about five minutes and, as I sobbed, looked down at the patch where the game had restarted. I then descended the other side of the hill to a gully hedged about with black nettles and fell down on the rough dry grass where, abandoning all restraint, I wept bitterly and inconsolably.

That day there was not, could not be in the whole wide world, anyone more unhappy than me.

In the morning I looked at myself fearfully in the mirror: my nose had swelled up and spread, my left eye had a bruise below it; underneath that a heavy, bloody abrasion curved across my cheek. How I could go to school in such a state, I was unable to conceive but I had to go somehow; I dared not miss a lesson whatever the reason. What if nature had blessed people with

noses rather more regular than mine? Even if it wasn't in the usual place nobody could mistake it for anything but a nose. The bruise and the abrasion, however, couldn't be explained away: it was plain they weren't an adornment of my own choosing.

Using a hand to cover up my eye I slipped into class, sat down at my desk and kept my head lowered. First lesson just had to be French. Lidia Mikhailovna, as our form teacher, took more of an interest in us than the other teachers, so it was hard to keep anything from her. She used to come in and greet us, but, before seating the class, had a habit of intently examining practically everybody, making criticisms in a joking sort of way, but meaning them to be acted upon for all that. She spotted the marks on my face at once, of course, despite my attempts at concealment. I realized this when the boys began to turn and look at me.

'Well, now,' said Lidia Mikhailovna opening the register. 'We have wounded among us today.'

The class started laughing, but Lidia Mikhailovna again raised her eyes to me. She had a squint and seemed to be looking past you, but we had learned by now to know where she was looking.

'And what happened?' she asked.

'I fell down,' I blurted. For some reason I had neglected to provide myself with even the makings of a decent explanation.

'Oh dear, how unfortunate. Yesterday or today?'

'Today. No, yesterday evening when it was dark.'

'Ha, fell down,' cried Tishkin, choking with pleasure. 'Vadik in Grade Seven gave him that. They were playing for money, he started arguing and got what was coming. I saw it, didn't I? And he says he fell over.'

I was dumbfounded by this treachery. Didn't he realize anything at all, or was he doing it deliberately? For gambling we could be expelled in two shakes. Now I'd done it all right. My head started buzzing with panic; done for, I was done for

now. Tishkin now. That was Tishkin for you. He was glad. He'd spilled the beans, it was all up.

'I was going to ask you something quite different Tishkin,' interrupted Lidia Mikhailovna, who indicated no surprise and retained her calm, rather detached tone. 'Come up to the board, since you've plenty to say, and get ready to answer.' She waited while Tishkin, dismayed and unhappy, all of a sudden came up to the board; she then said tersely to me, 'Stay behind after school.'

My greatest fear was that Lidia Mikhailovna would haul me in front of the head. That would mean that, besides today's discussion, I should be led out in front of the school assembly and be forced to say what had made me get mixed up in this dirty business. The headmaster, Vassily Andreyevich, always asked the guilty party the same question whatever the crime—broken a window, been fighting or smoking in the lavatories: 'What prompted you to get mixed up in this dirty business?' He used to pace up and down in front of the assembly, hands behind his back, thrusting his shoulders forward in time with his long strides, so that it looked as if his bulging, tightly-buttoned jacket was proceeding independently slightly ahead of him; meanwhile he would egg you on: 'Well, answer, answer, we're waiting. Look, the whole school is waiting to hear what you have to say to us.' The pupil would start mumbling something in his defence, but the head would interrupt him: 'Answer the question, the question. What was the question?' 'What prompted me?' 'Exactly: what prompted you? We are listening.'

The business usually ended in tears, and only after that did the head relax and we were able to disperse to our lessons. It was more difficult with the senior boys who were reluctant to cry, but couldn't respond to Vassily Andreyevich's question.

On one occasion, first lesson was delayed by ten minutes, and for all that time the head was interrogating a tenth-grade student; as he couldn't get anything comprehensible out of him he led him off to his study.

And what would I have to say for myself? I flirted for a brief instant with the idea that I might be able to go back home, but at once took fright as if scalded: no, I couldn't return home under a cloud like this. It would be a different matter if I gave up school myself . . . But then I could be called an unreliable type seeing that I hadn't coped with what I had wanted and everybody would start keeping clear of me. No, anything but that. I could put up with things here, I could get used to it, but I couldn't go home like that.

After school, perishing from fear, I waited for Lidia Mikhailovna in the corridor. She came out of the staff room and nodded to me before taking me into the classroom. As always she seated herself at her desk, while I made to sit at the third row of pupils' desks so as to be at some distance, but Lidia Mikhailovna indicated the first, immediately in front of her.

'Is it true you play for money?' she began at once. She asked too loudly: it seemed to me that in school one should only whisper such things; my alarm grew. To stay silent made no sense, Tishkin had succeeded in betraying me past all hope. I mumbled: 'Yes.'

'Well now, do you win or lose?'

I hesitated, not knowing which was better.

'Come on, tell me the truth. You lose, I suppose?'

'I . . . I win.'

'Good, all right. So you win. And what do you do with the money?'

When I first went to school I took a long time to get accustomed to Lidia Mikhailovna's voice; it used to get me confused. In the country we used to sink our voices deep inside, so that they came out really strong, but Lidia Mikhailovna's was somehow frail and light, forcing you to listen closely; this wasn't at all a matter of weakness – sometimes she could give full vent – but as if she suppressed it, or used unnecessary economy, I was prepared to blame it all on French; naturally,

while she was studying and getting accustomed to a foreign speech, her voice drooped in captivity and grew weaker, like a bird in a cage, but now it could spread its wings and grow stronger. Just as now, Lidia Mikhailovna was putting her questions as if her mind was preoccupied with something else, of greater importance; from her interrogation nevertheless there was no escape.

‘Well now, what do you do with the money that you win? Buy sweets? Books? Saving up for something? You’ve got quite a bit by now, I suppose?’

‘No, not much. I only win a rouble.’

‘You don’t play on after that?’

‘No.’

‘A rouble? Why a rouble? What do you do with it?’

‘I buy milk.’

‘Milk?’

She was sitting in front of me, neat, intelligent, beautiful; beautiful in the way she dressed and in the prime of her young womanhood; I sensed this vaguely, as her perfume, which I took for her breathing, wafted towards me. Besides all this she was a teacher, not of arithmetic, history or anything like that, but of that enigmatic French Tongue, which was also redolent of some special magic, not to be possessed by just anyone, me for example. Not daring to lift my eyes to her, I did not dare to deceive her. And, after all, why should I lie?

She was silent for a while, surveying me and I sensed in my skin how, under her attentive squinting eyes, my absurdities and misfortunes seemed to expand and pour forth in all their foul intensity. I was a fine sight of course: on the desk in front of her writhed a wild-looking emaciated boy, lonely, unkempt in the absence of his mother and with his face battered; an old, washed-out little jacket on with shoulders sometimes drooping over the chest, but always permitting the forearms to protrude; then there were the easily soiled pants, now showing the signs of yesterday’s fracas, stitched from his father’s jodhpurs and

stuffed into hide leggings. I had noticed previously Lidia Mikhailovna's curiosity with regard to my footwear. I was the only one in the entire class who wore hide slippers. It was only the following autumn, when I refused point-blank to go back to school in them, that mother sold the sewing machine, the only thing of value we possessed, to provide me with waterproof boots.

'All the same, you shouldn't play for money,' said Lidia Mikhailovna thoughtfully. 'You should get by somehow without that. Can you?'

Not daring to believe in my salvation, I was quick to promise: 'Yes, I can.'

I spoke sincerely, but what can one do? Sincerity can't be fastened down with a strap.

To tell the truth, things were going badly for me at that time. Because of the dry autumn, our collective farm had finished with the grain deliveries early and Uncle Johnny came no more. I knew that, at home, Mother was at her wits' end worrying over me, but that did not make things easier. The last sack of potatoes delivered by Uncle Johnny evaporated as swiftly as if they'd been fed to the cattle. It was a good thing that it occurred to me to secrete a few in an unused outhouse in the yard; it was on this secret hoard that I now existed. After school on the sly, like a criminal, I used to sneak into the shed, stuff a few potatoes in my pocket, then run outside and into the hills; in some convenient secluded hollow I would start a fire. I was always hungry. Even when I was asleep I could feel shuddering waves passing through my stomach.

It was in the hope of coming across some new group of players that I began to keep a discreet watch on neighbouring streets, strolling across waste ground and following boys into the hills. It was all to no avail, the season was over and the cold October winds were beginning to blow. Only at our patch did the lads continue to foregather as before. I hovered in the vicinity and saw the throwing stone catch the sunlight. I saw

Vadik running the game with much waving of arms and familiar figures stooping over the coins.

Finally, I could contain myself no longer and went down to them. I knew that I was humiliating myself, but it was no more humiliating than coming to terms once and for all with the fact that I had been beaten up and thrown out. I felt an urge to see how Vadik and Birdy would react to my joining them and how I would cope myself. But the hunger drove me most of all. I had to have a rouble – not for milk now, for bread. I knew no other way to get it.

At my approach the game came to a halt; everybody stared at me. Birdy was wearing a cap with turned-up earflaps. It sat on him, as did everything else he wore, carelessly and with an air of defiance. He had on a short-sleeved check shirt outside his trousers; Vadik was flashily dressed in a good quality jerkin with zippers.

Nearby was a heap of jerseys and top coats. On top of them sat a small boy aged five or six, huddled against the wind.

Birdy was the first to greet me: 'What are you here for? Haven't been beaten up for a while?'

'I've come to play,' I replied, as coolly as I knew how, and looked at Vadik.

'Who told you you'd get a game here?' Birdy swore.

'Nobody.'

'What do you think, Vadik, shall we go over him now or wait a bit?'

'Lay off him, Birdy,' said Vadik, his eyes narrowed. 'The man's come to play with us, see. Maybe he wants to win ten roubles off us?'

'You haven't got ten roubles,' said I only so as not to seem a complete coward.

'We've got more than you've ever dreamed of. Put your money in and shut up while Birdy keeps his temper. He's wild when he's roused.'

'Shall I let him have it, Vadik?'

'No, let him play.' Vadik winked at the spectators. 'He's a great player, we're not in his class.'

I was more experienced now and realized what this indulgence on Vadik's part really meant. He'd obviously grown tired of boring, undemanding play, so to ginger up his nerves a bit and get the taste of real competition again he had resolved to let me in. If I were to injure his self-esteem, however, I would get short shrift. He would find a pretext for that with Birdy at his side.

I decided to play cautiously and not have designs on the kitty. Like the rest, so as not to stand out, I threw the stone, afraid I might win the prize by mistake; after that, I quietly bounced it among the coins glancing behind me in case Birdy had come up. Those first days I did not allow myself even to dream of a rouble; twenty or thirty kopecks for a piece of bread and glad of it.

Nevertheless, what was bound to happen sooner or later duly came to pass. On the fourth day, when I made to leave after winning a rouble, I was beaten up again. True, on this occasion I got off more lightly, but one trace did remain; my lip came up like a balloon. I had to keep sucking it in when I was in school, but no matter how much I did so, no matter how I tried to conceal it, Lidia Mikhailovna spotted it. She deliberately called me up to the board and made me read out a French text. I couldn't have pronounced it properly even with ten unbruised lips but, with one, the least said the better.

'Stop, dear me, stop!' Lidia Mikhailovna exclaimed in alarm and waved her arms at me as if at some evil apparition. 'What on earth is this? I can see we shall have to teach you on your own. There's just no other way.'

Days of torment and embarrassment now began for me. From first thing in the morning I would anticipate the hour when I would be closeted with Lidia Mikhailovna and force my tongue to repeat after her those words so difficult to pronounce,

designed solely as a punishment. Well I mean, why, if not as a mockery, should there be three vowels running into one thick drawn-out sound 'O', as in for example, '*beaucoup*'? It's enough to make you hang yourself. Why make sounds down your nose with a sort of moan when, since time immemorial, it has served man in quite another capacity? Why? There have to be rational limits somewhere. I sweated profusely, blushed, lost my breath, while Lidia Mikhailovna mercilessly persisted in compelling me to develop callouses on my tongue. And why just me? The school had plenty of kids who spoke French no better than I did; they walked at liberty, they did what they wanted, while I was like someone cursed and took the rap for everyone else.

As it turned out, even this wasn't the worst of it. Lidia Mikhailovna abruptly decided that there wasn't enough time in school before the second shift so she told me to come to her flat in the evenings. She lived next door to the school in a teacher's house. In the other, larger half of the house lived the headmaster himself.

I went there as if to a torture chamber. I was shy and timid enough by nature, liable to go to pieces at the least thing; there in that clean, neat little teacher's flat I was literally petrified at first and afraid even to breathe. I had to be told to take my things off, come into the room and sit down. I had to be moved about as if I were an inanimate object and force had virtually to be applied to get a word out of me. This didn't assist my progress in French at all. Strange to relate, we actually worked less here than in school, where the arrival of the second shift was supposed to be such a hindrance. Lidia Mikhailovna, moreover, busy about the flat, kept asking me questions about my life or talked about herself. I suspect she deliberately made up for my sake the story that she had studied French only because she had also found it hard at school and decided to prove to herself that she could master it as well as anyone else.

Hunched up in a corner I listened, despairing of ever being released. There were a lot of books in the room, while on a

small table by the window stood a large, handsome radio and record-player, a rare thing for those times; I had never seen such a wonder in my life. Lidia Mikhailovna would put on records and an accomplished male voice would start teaching yet more French. What with one thing and another, there was just no avoiding it. Lidia Mikhailovna, wearing a plain dress and soft felt slippers, moved around the flat, making me tremble whenever she came near me. I just couldn't believe I was sitting in her house; everything here was too unexpected and unfamiliar for me, even the air, saturated with the strange odours of a life other than that which I had known. The feeling grew against my will that I was observing this life from outside and from shame and self-consciousness I huddled still deeper inside my straitjacket.

Lidia Mikhailovna was then probably around twenty-five or so; I well remember her features, regular and consequently not too lively, eyes narrowed so as to conceal her squint, her tight smile rarely permitted its full width and her jet black, short-cut hair. But for all that, there was nothing in her face of that harshness which I afterwards observed as being almost a professional mark of experienced teachers, even the softest and most good-natured of them. She did possess a sort of cautious, sly air of bewilderment about her, seeming to say: how did I get here and what am I doing here?

I now think she had previously been married; her voice, the way she walked – softly but with self-assured freedom, the whole pattern of behaviour suggested courage and lived experience. Besides which, I have always held the opinion that girls learning French or Spanish become women earlier than those taking, say, Russian or German.

I feel ashamed when I recall how terrified and confused I felt when Lidia Mikhailovna offered me supper after the lesson was over. However ravenous I was, my appetite left me on the spot. Sit at the same table as Lidia Mikhailovna! No, never! Better if I had to learn the entire French language by heart for

the next day and never have to come back here again. A lump of bread really would have stuck in my throat. It seems that till then I hadn't suspected that Lidia Mikhailovna ate perfectly ordinary food, just like the rest of us, not manna from heaven; so special had she appeared to me, so unlike everyone else.

I used to leap to my feet, and fumble along the wall towards the door, mumbling that I was full up and didn't want anything to eat. Lidia Mikhailovna would watch me with surprise and annoyance but wild horses couldn't have prevented me leaving. This was repeated several times until, in despair, she ceased to invite me to the table. I breathed more freely.

One day I was informed that down below in the cloakroom a parcel had come for me. Some peasant had brought it. Uncle Johnny of course, our driver, what other peasant could it be? Our house had been locked no doubt and Uncle Johnny had not been able to wait for me till after school, so he'd left it in the cloakroom. I had a hard time containing my impatience till school ended, then rushed downstairs. Aunty Vera, the school cleaner, pointed out a white plywood case, the sort used for sending parcels through the post, standing in the corner. I was surprised: why a case? Mother usually sent food in an ordinary sack. Was it for me at all? Yes, my class and surname were on the lid. Clearly Uncle Johnny had written them on here so there would be no confusion. What was Mother thinking of, packing food up in cases? Grown posh in her old age!

I couldn't take the parcel home without knowing what was in it: my patience wouldn't stretch. Obviously it wasn't potatoes. It was on the light side for bread, too, and hardly suitable as packing.

Besides which I'd been sent bread not long ago; I still had some. So what was in there? At once, still inside the school, I ducked under the stairs where, as I recalled, there was an axe. When I found it, I pried off the lid. It was dark under the stairs, so I slid out and, glancing round like a thief, placed the box on a nearby windowsill.

Peeping inside the package, I was stupified: neatly wrapped in a large sheet of white paper lay – macaroni. Now that was something! Long, yellow tubes packed one with another in even rows, they gleamed in the light, a treasure greater than any that could exist for me. Now I understood why mother had used a case: so the macaroni wouldn't break or be crushed, but would reach me preserved and whole. I carefully drew out one tube, looked at it, blew down it and then, throwing restraint to the winds, began to munch greedily. After that, I did the same with a second, then a third, while cogitating over where I could hide the box safe from the voracious mice in my landlady's pantry. Mother hadn't spent her last copper for that, no, I wouldn't let macaroni go so easily. Potatoes were a different matter.

Suddenly I choked. Macaroni ... yes, really, where had Mother got hold of it? There had never been any in our village since I was born; you couldn't get it for love or money. What did this mean? Hastily, in mingled hope and despair, I rummaged among the macaroni and found on the floor of the box several large pieces of sugar and two bars of milk chocolate. That clinched it: Mother had not sent this parcel. In that case, who? I looked at the lid again: my class, my surname – me. Interesting, very interesting.

I pushed back the nails holding the lid and, leaving the box on the sill, went up to the first floor and knocked on the staff room door. Lidia Mikhailovna had already gone. Well all right, we'll find her, we know where she lives, we've been there, haven't we? That was it, then, you don't want to sit at the table, have your food at home. That's it then. It won't work. It must be her. It wasn't Mother: she would not have forgotten to put in a note; she would have said where such riches had been mined.

When I slid sideways in at the door with the parcel, Lidia Mikhailovna put on an expression of total incomprehension.

She looked at the box, which I had placed before her on the floor, and asked in wonderment: 'What's that? What have you brought? Why?'

'You did this,' I said in a trembling, broken voice.

'What have I done? What are you talking about?'

'You sent this parcel to the school. I know it was you.'

I observed that Lidia Mikhailovna was flushed and embarrassed. It was the one and only time, clearly, when I was not afraid to look her directly in the eyes. I didn't give a hang if she was a teacher or my aunty three times removed. I was asking the questions here, not she, and in Russian, not French. No articles. Let her provide the answers.

'Why have you decided it's me?'

'Because we never have any macaroni back home. Or medicinal chocolate either.'

'What! Never?' She was so sincerely astonished, that she gave herself away completely.

'There's never been any. You should have known.'

She laughed suddenly and attempted to hug me, but I backed away.

'Yes, I really should have known. How could I have done it?' She reflected for a moment. 'It was hard to think of it here though – honestly! I'm from the city. There's never any, you say? What do you have then?'

'There's peas. And radishes.'

'Peas . . . radishes. Back home in the Kuban we've got apple trees. When I think of all the apples there now. I wanted to go to the Kuban but for some reason came here instead.' She sighed and glanced at me. 'Don't be mad at me. I did it for the best. Who'd have thought I'd go wrong on macaroni? Never mind, from now on I'll be cleverer. You take the macaroni anyway . . .'

'No, I won't,' I broke in.

'Now, why be like that? I know you're starving. I live on my own, I've got plenty of money. I can buy whatever I want, but just for me . . . I only eat a little bit, I'm afraid of getting fat.'

'I'm not starving at all.'

'Don't argue with me, please, I know. I've been talking to

your landlady. What's wrong if you take this macaroni now and boil yourself a good dinner tonight. Why can't I help you – just this once? I promise I won't sneak any more parcels in to you. Just take this one, please. You really must eat properly if you want to learn. We've got lots of well-fed numskulls in the school who can't grasp anything and probably never will, but you're a bright lad; you mustn't give up school.'

Her voice was beginning to have a lulling effect; I was afraid she would talk me round and, annoyed with myself for recognizing she was right and for being determined to misunderstand her, all the same, I shook my head and muttered something as I rushed out of the door.

Our lessons did not come to an end; I kept on going to Lidia Mikhailovna. Now she had taken me properly in hand. She had apparently decided: well all right, French it is then. Certainly some use came of it. I began gradually to pronounce French words; they didn't collapse at my feet now like so many heavy cobblestones but instead began to resonate, attempted flight even.

'Very good,' she encouraged me. 'This term you won't get an A, but next term it's a certainty.'

We never spoke about the parcel, but I was always on my guard, in case. There was no telling what she might think up. I knew from my own experience that if you fail in something, you try everything to get your way, you can't just give up. It seemed to me that Lidia Mikhailovna was always taking expectant looks at me, and at the same time making fun of my wildness – I got angry, but oddly enough my anger helped me to behave in a self-assured manner. I was no longer that taciturn, helpless little boy who was afraid to take one step here; I had got used somewhat to Lidia Mikhailovna and her flat. I was still shy, of course, huddling in corners and hiding myself under the chair, but my former constraint and depression had lifted. Now I was bold enough to put questions myself to Lidia Mikhailovna and even engage her in argument.

She did make one more attempt to get me to eat supper – no good. Here I was adamant. I was stubborn enough for ten.

I could probably have given up these home lessons; I had mastered the main problem. My tongue had softened and become flexible. The rest would have come to me in my school lessons. There were years ahead. What was I going to do afterwards if I learned everything from start to finish in one fell swoop? I couldn't make up my mind to tell Lidia Mikhailovna about this, however, and she clearly considered our course to be far from completed, so I went on with my drudgery. But was it drudgery? Somehow, unwittingly and imperceptibly, I developed, to my own surprise, a taste for the language and in my free moments, without any urging, poked about in dictionaries and read ahead in my textbook. My torment was turning into a pleasure. I was still buoyed up by my self-esteem: if I hadn't coped till now then I would in future – and as well as the very best. Was I of different clay? If only I didn't still have to go to Lidia Mikhailovna . . . I would do it myself, myself . . .

One day, about three weeks after the affair of the parcel, Lidia Mikhailovna asked me with a smile: 'Well, aren't you gambling any more? Or are you sneaking off somewhere and having a little game?'

'How can I play now?' I was astonished and indicated the snow lying outside the window.

'What sort of a game was it? How do you play it?'

'Why should you want to know?' I said guardedly.

'Just out of interest. We used to play when I was a girl, so I want to know if it's the same game or not. Go on, tell me, don't be afraid.'

I told her, leaving out Vadik and Birdy naturally and any mention of the little tricks I employed during the game.

'No,' said she, shaking her head. 'We played walls. Do you know what that is?'

'No.'

'Well, watch.' She jumped lightly up from behind the table,

found some coppers in her bag and moved a chair away from the wall. 'Come here and see. I throw a coin against the wall.' Here she struck the wall lightly and the coin tinkled and flew to the floor describing an arc. 'Now,' Lidia Mikhailovna pressed a second coin into my hand. 'You do it. But remember, you have to throw so that your coin lands as close as possible to mine. So that you can reach with the fingers of one hand. We used to call the game "measures" as well. If you can reach, you win. Your go.'

I threw. My coin landed on its edge and rolled into a corner.

'Oh,' Lidia Mikhailovna waved a hand. 'That's gone a long way. Right, now you start. Remember, if my coin touches yours, even just clips it with the edge, I win double. Got it?'

'That's easy.'

'Do you want to play?'

I couldn't believe my ears. 'How can I play against you?'

'Why not?'

'But you're a teacher!'

'What of it? A teacher's a different sort of person, is that it? You sometimes get fed up being only a teacher, teaching and teaching endlessly. Always being on best behaviour: can't do this, can't do that.'

She had screwed up her eyes more than usual and was gazing out of the window in a thoughtful, preoccupied sort of way. 'Sometimes it's a good thing to forget you're a teacher and not be such an old curmudgeon that people find you boring to be with. Perhaps the most important thing is not to take oneself too seriously; realize one can teach only a little.' She got a grip on herself and at once became more cheerful. 'When I was young I was a terrible child, my parents had a lot to put up with. Even now I often want to jump and race off somewhere, do something not on the programme, outside the timetable, something *I* feel like. Sometimes I jump and skip about here. A person doesn't get old when he lives to old age – it's when he stops being a child. I would skip every day if I could, only Vassily Andreyevich lives on the other side of the wall. He's a very

serious person. He must never, ever know we were playing.'

'We aren't playing "measures", or whatever it is, you've only shown me.'

'We could play just like that, as they say. But you mustn't give me away to Vassily Andreyevich.'

Lord, what things happen in this world! I'd been scared to death for ages that Lidia Mikhailovna would haul me in front of the headmaster for gambling and now she was asking me not to give her away. It was a miracle, no less. I stared around, afraid of I don't know what, and looked my blank dismay.

'Well, shall we try? If we don't like it, we'll stop.'

'All right,' I agreed without conviction.

'You start.'

We sorted out our coins. It was clear that Lidia Mikhailovna had indeed played before. I was only just getting used to the game; I hadn't worked out yet just how to bounce the coin off the wall – on its edge or full face, or what height it was best to aim at, or how hard to throw. My throws were pure guesswork; if we'd kept score, I would have lost a good deal in the first few minutes, although there was nothing tricky in the game itself. Of course the thing that inhibited and embarrassed me most of all and prevented me from getting the feel of it, was playing against Lidia Mikhailovna. I could never have dreamed of such a thing or imagined it in some grim flight of fancy. I took some time to collect myself and when, with difficulty, I did so and paid some small attention to the game, Lidia Mikhailovna promptly called a halt.

'No. There's no fun in this,' she said, standing up and brushing the hair from her eyes. 'We should play for real, not like three-year-olds.'

'That would be gambling,' said I timorously.

'Of course. What are we holding in our hands? There's no substitute for playing for money. That's what's good and bad about it. We can fix a very small stake but it's bound to be more interesting.'

I said nothing, not knowing what to do or what attitude to adopt.

‘You’re not afraid, are you?’ She was teasing me.

‘That’ll be the day! I’m not afraid of anything.’

I had a few coppers with me. I gave one to Lidia Mikhailovna and fished mine out of my pocket. Well, all right, let’s play for real, Lidia Mikhailovna, if that’s what you want. What was it to me – she’d suggested it, not me. Vadik had paid no attention to me at first, later on he’d woken up and used his fists. I’d learned there and I’d learn here. This wasn’t French – and even that was well in hand.

I was compelled to accept one condition: since Lidia Mikhailovna’s hand was bigger and she had longer fingers, she should measure with her thumb and middle finger. I would measure normally using thumb and little finger. That was fair and I agreed.

The game re-started. We decamped from the sitting-room to the hallway; there was more space there and we had a flat wooden wall to throw against. We threw, got down on our knees, crawled about the floor, bumping into each other; we spread our fingers measuring distances, then stood up again and Lidia Mikhailovna would announce the score. She was a noisy player: she shrieked, clapped her hands, urged me on by teasing – in a word, she comported herself like a normal girl, not a teacher. I even felt like shouting at her now and again. Nevertheless, it was she who was doing the winning; I was losing. I barely had time to collect my wits before she was eighty kopecks ahead. I managed to cut back the deficit to thirty with considerable effort but then Lidia Mikhailovna from long distance dropped her coin on mine and my debt jumped up to fifty. I began to get worried. We had agreed to settle up at the end of the game but if things went on like this much longer I would soon come to the end of my resources. I only had just over a rouble. I couldn’t go beyond a rouble, that would be disgrace, shame and disgrace for life.

It was at this point I realized that Lidia Mikhailovna was not

trying to win at all. When she measured, she kept her fingers arched and never stretched them full out; where she supposedly couldn't reach the coin, I managed it without strain. This exasperated me and I got to my feet.

'No,' I announced, 'I'm not playing like that. Why are you not playing properly – it's not fair.'

'But I really can't reach them,' she began to object. 'My fingers are sort of wooden.'

'You can.'

'All right, all right. I'll try from now on.'

I don't know how it is in math, but in real life, the best proof is in contraries. Next day, when I saw Lidia Mikhailovna moving a coin towards her on the sly so as to get her finger near it, I was flabbergasted. Glancing at me and for some reason not observing that I could see her blatant cheating, she went on moving the coin as if nothing had happened.

'What are you doing?' I asked, indignant.

'Me? Well, what am I doing?'

'Why did you move it?'

'I didn't, it was lying here.' She denied the charge in a totally shameless fashion, with a touch of joy even, worthy of Vadik or Birdy.

Well, that takes the cake! Supposed to be a teacher. I saw her touching that coin, with my own eyes at a distance of twenty centimetres and here was she assuring me she hadn't touched it and making mock of me, what's more. Did she think I was blind? A kid? Teaches French, supposed to. I had totally forgotten that only yesterday Lidia Mikhailovna had been trying to lose to me, and now I was making sure she wasn't cheating. Well, well, Lidia Mikhailovna ...

That day we spent about fifteen or twenty minutes doing French and after that still less. We now had a new interest. Lidia Mikhailovna used to make me read a passage, corrected me and listened to the corrected reading, then with no more delay we got on with the game. After two trifling losses, I

started winning. I had quickly become adept at 'measures', and knew all the tricks. I knew how and where to throw, what to do to make sure my coin didn't get measured.

So once again I possessed money. Once more I visited the market to buy milk – now in frozen mugs. I carefully cut off the layer of cream and poured the splintering shards into my mouth; as I sensed their filling sweetness, I closed my eyes in sheer pleasure. I then turned the mug upside down and poked with my knife at the sweetish milky sediment. I allowed the fragments to melt and drank them off, chewing meanwhile on a piece of black bread.

It was all right. One could get by and, pretty soon, when the scars of war were healed, good times were promised for all.

Taking money from Lidia Mikhailovna made me feel awkward, of course, but I reassured myself every time with the thought that it was, after all, honest winnings. I never insisted on playing; Lidia Mikhailovna always suggested it herself. I never dared to refuse. It seemed to me that playing gave her pleasure; she was cheerful, she laughed and pushed me about.

If we had known how it would all end . . .

. . . Facing each other on our knees, we had started arguing about the score. Before that, I believe, we had been arguing about something else.

'Listen, pudding-head,' Lidia Mikhailovna was trying to convince me as she advanced upon me, waving her arms, 'why should I cheat you? I keep the score, not you, so I should know. I lost three times running and before that I was "chika".'

'That doesn't count.'

'Why not?'

We were shouting, interrupting each other, when we became conscious of a harsh, ringing voice expressing astonishment, not to say stunned amazement:

'Lidia Mikhailovna!'

We froze. In the doorway stood Vassily Andreyevich.

'Lidia Mikhailovna, what's the matter with you? What is

going on here?’

Lidia Mikhailovna slowly, very slowly rose from her knees, flushed and tousled. Brushing back her hair, she spoke: ‘I had hoped, Vassily Andreyevich, that you would knock before coming in here.’

‘I did knock. No one answered the door. What is going on here? Explain, please. As headmaster, I have the right to know.’

‘We are playing,’ replied Lidia Mikhailovna calmly.

‘You are playing for money with this? ...’ Vassily Andreyevich prodded me with his finger and I crawled off terror-stricken behind the partition so as to conceal myself in the sitting-room. ‘You were playing with a pupil? I have understood you correctly?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I must say ...’ The headmaster was gasping, he could not get his breath. ‘I am at a loss to give a name to what you have done. It is a crime. Corruption of minors. And more, more ... it’s ... I have worked in schools for twenty years, and seen much, but this ...’

And he lifted his hands above his head.

Three days later Lidia Mikhailovna departed. On her last evening, she met me after school and walked me home.

‘I’m going back to the Kuban,’ she said as we parted. ‘You study and don’t fret. Nobody will touch you because of this stupid affair. It was my fault. Work hard.’ She ruffled my hair and left.

I never saw her again.

In the middle of winter, just after the January holidays, a parcel arrived for me at school. When I opened it, using the same axe from under the stairs – tubes of macaroni lay there in neat solid rows. But underneath, in a thick wrapping of cotton wool, I found three red apples.

Previously I had only seen apples in pictures, but I guessed what they were.